“Lost in a Book: Immersion Reading and Liberal Education”

by

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Thank you so much for the invitation to speak to you on the occasion of your reunion. Thank you also, reunion class of 1964, for your generosity to future Washington and Lee students. I understand that you have dedicated your class gift to the Center for Global Learning. We are so very grateful to you for your vision. There are few things more important to the success of our current and future students than their readiness to be citizens of the world, to move with a degree of familiarity and openness to difference through places far from this enclave of learning. The Center for Global Learning will be the cosmopolitan crossroads at the end of Stemmons Plaza. I think of it as little Lexington’s equivalent of a bustling train station in the center of a great city, where you can board the train that will whisk you through the Chunnel to Paris, or across the Mongolian steppes, or, if you can find your way to platform nine and three quarters, into those great countries of the imagination that we inhabit when we get lost in a book.

The metaphor for reading that I just used calls up the idea of imaginative transportation, which is one way of thinking about immersion, or getting lost in a book. To the immersed reader, the experience may feel like getting away, but it doesn’t actually feel like being lost. I travel in my mind with Lyra to the place in Svalbard where the armored bears live. I stand with Jay Gatsby looking across the water at the green light marking the end of Daisy Buchanan’s dock. I think you have been there, too! I return to London between
the wars, where I never was in real life, when I reread *Mrs. Dalloway*. I walk with Leopold Bloom through the familiar streets of 1904 Dublin on a June day, in the company of the exiled James Joyce, who invented his Dublin of the mind from far away in time and distance.

Imaginative transportation endows the reader with astonishing super-powers. We need no translator to speak the local lingo; we can see into the minds of our companions; and the narrator will carry us through to the end of our journey even if we are bewildered by strange and unfamiliar beings along the way. A re-reader is especially empowered by getting lost in a book. Once I go through that wardrobe in the spare room, I know how to find Mr. Tumnus and I can see in my mind’s eye the beaver dam, and the snowy wood, and the way to the White Witch’s castle. And I am not alone. A reader lost in a book has thousands or even millions of companions, and it is easier than ever before to share the pleasure of reading with them. Just a few months ago I urged friends of mine on this campus to read *The Goldfinch*—now, thanks to the Pulitzer Prize, people all over the world are sharing in the pleasure of that exhilarating novel.\(^1\) Every last one of us knows the little Maltese terrier Popchik. In real life I am allergic to dogs, but I am not allergic to Donna Tartt’s Popchik. A friend of Popchik is a friend of mine. Getting lost in a book makes me smarter, more alert to the experiences of others, and it helps me build a sense of self as connected to inhabitants of other times and spaces. As the mural over the circulation desk at my local library proclaimed, Books Are Many Lives to Live.

Now, to the outside observer of an immersed reader, things look rather different. The person with her nose in a book looks not like a traveller, an adventurer, a world co-creator, rather an ignorer of others, a shutter-out, an anti-social being, and maybe even a

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self-endangering fool, if she has a habit of walking around while reading, as I did.

“Immersed” is a polite word for how this behavior seems to others! My little sisters could barely tolerate it. They would put their hands over the page. They were right; I was ignoring them! Since I am going to spend almost all my time with you defending (in a scholarly way) the habit of leaving this real world, in favor of entering nonexistent realms peopled with vivid no-bodies,2 choosing fictional over real beings as especially deserving our time and attention, I think it is only fair first to rehearse the arguments against immersion reading.

As a form of “escapism,” immersion reading is considered socially acceptable only if you are on vacation. Immersion reading looks awfully lazy. Even English professors are understood to be reading hard books, the kind of works that require decoding, and lots of marginal note-making, and reference books close at hand. Immersion reading is generally understood to be easy reading, and that’s not good. No pain, no gain! Immersion reading does not fit readily into our regimens of self-improvement. There is too much pleasure in it. It seems suspect, like a mood-enhancing drug. It wastes time. Several centuries ago, it was roundly criticized as taking readers away from their Bibles, and that constituency of critics is still out there, worrying about the baleful influence of Harry Potter on a generation of children. A particular concern lies in wasteful expenditures of feeling. This critique goes all the way back to Saint Augustine: what are we doing, wasting our real feelings on the imaginary fates of made-up beings?3 What happens to readers when they get lost in a book,


3 See the third book of Augustine’s Confessions for his meditation on the emotional attractions of fiction.
and what might happen afterwards when we surface and come back to the real world?

Should a liberal education encourage immersion reading?

This brings us round to narrative empathy, which is the area of my scholarly expertise. Narrative empathy may enhance the illusion of immersion in a fictional world by deepening the felt connection of the reader with the imaginary inhabitants of the storyworld. Before I go any further, let me explain what narrative empathy is and how it is related to but different from real world empathy. Narrative empathy is different from real-life empathy because we feel it in response to a story rather than having a here-and-now reaction to another living creature in the real world. Yet it can feel just as intense when we share feelings in narrative empathy. As I have earlier defined it, narrative empathy involves the sharing of feeling, matched-up feelings, and perspective-taking brought about by reading, viewing, hearing about, or even imagining stories of another’s situation or condition. Authors experience it, which is part of why I include imagining. Narrative empathy plays a role in the aesthetics of production when writers feel it in the process of creating fiction. Just this past month on the radio program With Good Reason, novelist Carrie Brown testified that for her, writing is an act of empathy. She said, “I believe that there are many readers and writers for whom the experience of empathy is exactly why they read and why they write. If it is true, that we really all alone in the world, what greater comfort can there be than to accompany somebody else of their journey?”

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is not alone in her belief. Studies of fiction writers show that the most successful writers, those who can make a living by their work, score very high on empathy scales. They experience the illusion that their fictional creations possess independent agency, so when they “feel with” their characters, it is as if they were feeling with beings separate from themselves.\textsuperscript{6} This consequence of high empathy and an imaginative disposition may help in the creation of characters that evoke empathy in readers. Something lifelike is breathed into them through author’s empathy, even if they are unrealistic, fantastical characters. For readers, empathy appears to play a role in mental simulation of fictional worlds that readers perform when they co-create those worlds imaginatively. The aesthetics of literary response involves feelings evoked by the techniques writers use to cue the world-creation of fiction reading, a lot of which entails filling in gaps. If you have ever had a reading or viewing experience where you felt that you shared the sensations, feelings, thoughts, and experiences (sometimes invited by sharing the identity or circumstances) of a fictional character, then you have known narrative empathy. I think that some people find it easier to share feelings with fictional characters than with \textit{real life} individuals, in part because our fiction reading doesn’t demand anything of us. We can let our caution and skepticism relax when we read fiction: it doesn’t matter if we are fooled by it because we go into the experience knowing that it is unreal.\textsuperscript{7} Unreal worlds can have a profound influence on us: look at the generation of readers that J. K. Rowling gave us, willing to read big long novels


\textsuperscript{7} For a more extensive discussion of the ideas in this paragraph, see Suzanne Keen, \textit{Empathy and the Novel} (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2007).
for fun! George Eliot, who wrote some real whoppers, thought that a major purpose of her work was to cultivate her readers’ sympathetic imagination. And there is good evidence that novel reading can alter readers’ beliefs and attitudes. Furthermore, the deeper the immersion and the stronger the empathetic connection to fictional beings, the greater the chance of a reader’s prosocial responding to actual people or engaging in the personally costly helping behavior that we call altruism. Many philosophers and novelists have advocated novel reading as a good way of practicing perspective-taking, or a thinking form of empathy. New research carried out right here at W&L by psychology professor Dan R. Johnson and his students suggests that mental visualizing may have a greater empathic impact than thinking exercises designed to “put oneself in the shoes of another.”

Mental visualizing is a major element of immersion reading. It means the ability to call up a visual image in your mind’s eye. We do it when we are remembering, planning, and hearing or reading fiction. Just like empathy, which some people feel more strongly

8 In “The Natural History of German Life,” George Eliot writes, “The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment.” The Essays of George Eliot, ed. Nathan Sheppard (NY: Funk and Wagnalls, 1883) 144-45.

9 See for example Howard Sklar, The Art of Sympathy in Fiction: Forms of Ethical and Emotional Persuasion (Amsterdam, Benjamins, 2013).


11 There is a rich literature on the intensity of mental visualizing. See for example Andrew Matthews, Valerie Ridgeway, and Emily Holmes, “Feels like the real thing: Imagery is both more realistic and emotional than verbal thought.” Cognition and Emotion 27, 2 (2013): 217-229.
than others, mental visualizing ability is stronger in some people than in others, and many highly intelligent, successful people have weak mental visualizing skills. Normally in a group this size a few people will be very strong mental visualizers, with vivid pictures of places not present to you, and a few others will not be able to see anything at all in your minds’ eye. This faculty may have an impact on the way we co-create fictional worlds, and it almost certainly maps onto our preferences for different kinds of reading. Reading image-rich literature may be one of the ways we can cultivate a habit of mental visualizing. Some scholars think that today’s young people are less adept as a generation in mental visualizing than those of us who grew up without the vivid fictional worlds of video games visualized for them in three-dimensional color!

Every generation of readers will have some who are readier to immerse in fictional worlds from the cues of prose than others. Why should we care about this, and should it have a place in our conversations about liberal education? Dan Johnson’s research has shown that readers who are given exercises in mental visualizing before reading fiction, in controlled laboratory circumstances, do experience a greater degree of immersion in fictional worlds. Then, in a comparison of a group given perspective-taking instructions

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14 For example, Alan Richardson observes that today’s students lack the mental visualizing skills called upon (and cultivated in earlier generations) by image-rich Romantic poetry. See Richardson, The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010).
(put your self in the shoes of the character), the readers in the mental visualizing condition more readily immersed in fictional worlds. But that is not all! They also showed increases in empathic reactions and increased helping behavior. The reason this research matters to a literary critic is that it suggests a kind of reading, the immersion reading supported by strong mental visualizing, looks rather more valuable than escapist, more improving than lazy. Maybe we should be encouraging people to get lost in a book.

This research that I have just described validates what has sometimes been denigrated as “escapism.” Should we value (or fear) getting lost in a book? I think we should try to figure what’s happening to us when we are transported into a fictional world. When we lose track of time, is that a bad sign, or does that mean that immersion reading is a form of “flow”?15 I find being in a fictional world, even one full of violence and vengeance like the Icelandic sagas I have been reading in the past months, a mentally refreshing exercise. I also feel as if I make friends when I read characters, which admittedly means I have some really creepy friends! My own experiences of immersion reading have almost certainly been among the most pleasurable and influential practices of forty-five of my fifty-one years. Immersion reading made me who I am, with a head full of alternative worlds and an eclectic community of characters that I know better than some of the people I see every day.

Some developmental psychologists and philosophers believe that novel reading may participate in the socialization and moral internalization required for the transmutation of

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empathic guilt into prosocial action.\textsuperscript{16} That is, if we feel bad shared feelings with a character we may actually act in the real world on behalf of people who resemble that character. Generations of writers of socially-conscious fiction have tried to put this idea into action. But the documented cases are rare: \textit{Oliver Twist}, \textit{Uncle Tom's Cabin}, a few other novels that have done big things in the world. In \textit{Empathy and the Novel} I contested the moral sentimental claim that novel reading \textit{inevitably} works to form a more altruistic and peaceable citizenry. Martha Nussbaum is the most prominent philosopher to evoke psychology's empathy-altruism hypothesis\textsuperscript{17} in the context of reading fictional narratives.\textsuperscript{18} Nussbaum promises a beneficial civic and moral yield from novel reading, a view that has also been embraced by historians and psychologists.\textsuperscript{19} Yet whether narrative empathy and other feelings evoked by fiction reading actual result in moral improvement has been questioned, not only by me—the history of this suspicion goes back at least to the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{20} Among moral philosophers, the debate about the status of emotional responsiveness to narrative typically centers on the question of whether it should be cultivated (to encourage recognition of other minds, enhance comprehension, or form


\textsuperscript{17} On the empathy-altruism relation, see C. Daniel Batson, ed., \textit{The Altruism Question: Toward a Social-Psychological Answer} (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1991).

\textsuperscript{18} Nussbaum, \textit{Cultivating Humanity} 90.


\textsuperscript{20} See my overview of the debate in Keen, \textit{Empathy and the Novel} 37-64.
morality) or distrusted, as a potentially misleading capitulation to a frame of reference warped by bias or as an incitement to unruly behavior. (Remember Plato didn't want to have any poets in his Republic.) Ironically, the argument in favor of aesthetic emotions (that they should be cultivated through narrative) results in a more proscriptive, narrower list of valued narratives, while the suspicious argument (advocating dispassionate reading) more willing admits the potentially negative impact of narrative as encouraging escapism, time-wasting, and vicious habits.

Immersion reading looks risky in part because it admits a broader range of narrative, including comic books, video games, and romance novels. Some critics believe immersion reading is dangerous precisely because it engages the emotions. The stress marks between the two positions about narrative impact reveal different attitudes to reading itself, one admitting a broad range of narrative in an array of media (and fearing the impact of reading on people and society) and the other emphasizing the special benefits of reading canonical or at least celebrated and complex literary narratives (and promising the development of good world citizens and improved societies). Which is it to be? You may have read about a recent study by David Kidd and Emanuele Castano\textsuperscript{21} that showed that literary fiction reading encouraged improved mind-reading abilities, or Theory of Mind, whereas reading popular fiction, nonfiction, or nothing at all did not. They emphasized the way literary fiction ask readers to engage in active character construction, experience the “making strange” of defamiliarization, and the disruption of expectations. These features, they hypothesized, result in stable improvements in Theory of Mind, a cognitive capacity that is involved in how we understand others’ intentions and motivations. This study

raised way more questions than it answered, including how to categorize particular novels, as popular or literary. When I was running around campus recommending Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch* to my friends a few months ago, I was just saying “It’s a good read,” an unusually engrossing popular thriller. But now that it has won the Pulitzer Prize, has it become serious literary fiction? And what do you with a writer like Charles Dickens—now considered a mainstay of course syllabi and the literary canon—who in his own time was manifestly a popular novelist with a mass readership? I am inclined to think that whether a novel is considered serious or literary is much less important than the experience of reading it offers.

From my conversations with our own psychology professor Dan Johnson, I have learned that research subjects in a mental visualizing condition who had the experience of immersing themselves in an absorbing fictional world had an impact on enhanced empathy and even altruistic behavior. Being out of one’s own self and in another world differs from the ethical instruction to “walk a mile in another’s shoes” and it may supplement it. From another psychological study of readers of *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, by Shira Gabriel and Ariana Young,22 I learned that escapism and fantasy empathy may be accomplishing some of the work typically attributed to perspective-taking exercised across barriers of difference. They hypothesize that experiencing an engrossing narrative leads readers to be part of the collective described in the fictional world. The warm feeling of belonging, even to a tribe of vampires, may be contributing to the ethical effects of narrative usually attributed to imaginative extension of role-taking or perspective taking. Both of these research directions suggest that we ought to revise our prejudice against immersion in

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fantasy worlds and escapism as prominent effects of fiction reading. It turns out that reading popular fiction might actually be good for you, too. Perhaps like a healthy diet, a reader’s consumption of fiction should contain some of both, to exercise Theory of Mind, to engage the emotions, to create a feeling of warm belonging.

Encouraging our busy, credential-seeking students to get lost in a book, to sink scarce time into an imaginative escape, may seem rash or irresponsible, but that’s exactly what I do, and certainly not just with English majors. About a third of our students have double majors; many also carry minors; a couple dozen each year pursue double degrees. A significant number get permission to take overloads of 18 or more credits in each fall and winter term. Today's Washington and Lee students are ambitious and savvy. They supplement their academic courses of study with extracurricular involvements, in Music, Theater, Dance, in organizations such as the Williams Investment Society, and in our time-intensive form of student self-governance. More than 25% of them are varsity athletes; many take to the outdoors in Rockbridge County and beyond. They dedicate themselves to others through service activities here and abroad. Our minds boggle at how much they take on. And somehow they pull it off—on-time graduation is a hallmark of Washington and Lee. As far as we can tell, they don’t slow down after graduation, for five and ten years out, fully half of them possess or in progress on graduate or professional degrees. All of this is the source of tremendous pride and satisfaction, of course, and not only for the impact on our own students. The liberal education on offer at W&L indeed “nurture[s] the growth of human talent in the service of human freedom,” in William Cronon’s pithy definition.
In drawing on Cronon I hearken back to the beginning of this academic year, when all incoming first-years read and discussed his classic 1998 essay “Only Connect.” As Cronon recommends in his endorsement of liberal education, our students learn to listen and hear; to read and understand; to talk with anyone; to write clearly, persuasively, and movingly; to solve puzzles and problems; to respect rigorous inquiry as a way of seeking the truth; to practice humility, tolerance, and self-criticism; to get things done in the world; to nurture and empower the people around them; and finally, they “gain the power and the wisdom, [and] the generosity and freedom to connect.” Cronon doesn’t write much about novel-reading, but his title, “Only Connect” comes from E. M. Forster’s novel Howards End. The worlds of fiction belong in the daily lives of liberally educated people not only because they provide us with safe rehearsal spaces for intellectual risk-taking, and entrees into societies that we could never otherwise visit. They exercise our skills of mental visualizing, cultivate our empathy and sympathy, and cement us into communities of fellow-readers. Novels introduce us to universals of experience in spite of every kind of human difference. They connect virtually every desirable outcome of liberal education with pleasure, with mental refreshment, and with a time away from the pressures and demand of the real world. Allowing oneself to get lost in a book, immersed in a story, engrossed in the circumstances and fate of a fictional character, paradoxically links us with our kin, by which I mean only all of the rest of those unique story-telling animals—h humankind. And if recognition of our blessings and responsibilities as people among other people who share this world with us can start when we are lost in a book, then just think of what we can do when we put that book down.

Thank you for your attention.